Becoming-Violet: Mary Fullerton's Poetry and Lesbian Desire

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You say that violets fade upon your breast,
I'd rather dearest that mine perished there
Quick on your passionate heart than otherwhere.
Did some cold vase become their purpled nest
They longer there might live to die unblest:
Better their fragrance float about your hair,
Your heart-beats pulse their sweetness to the air
That breathed again gives aromatic rest.

The flower was made to give to Beauty dreams,
And when its soul for her behoof is spilled
So hers be fed by transitory gleams
With Meanings clear, its mission is fulfilled.
Breathing of love in its suspiring breath
Let the flower swoon to its luxurious death.[1]

There are four published volumes of Mary Fullerton's poetry, the last two brought out under the pseudonym of 'E' in the 1940s.[2] Mary Fullerton is remembered (in as much as she is remembered at all) for the terse, epigrammatic style of the later poems, reminiscent of her favourite poet, Emily Dickinson. In the archives of the Mitchell Library, however, there survive many unpublished poems, mostly from a much earlier period in Mary's life, and quite different in style and content. The untitled sonnet that prefaces this paper was one of the poems she wrote to her friend and companion of over thirty years, Mabel Singleton. Many of these are dated and dedicated with such epithets as 'With more love than can be spoken or written'. The poem quoted is not dated but its sentiments fit with the poems written during the early years after the two women met in Melbourne in 1909 when they were both office-bearers in Vida Goldstein's Women's Political Association.

Mary Fullerton described herself in her unpublished Memoirs as a 'go alone' woman, a phrase that has been picked up in bibliographies to explain the fact that she never married.[3] She qualified that description, however, with the following statement about women who refuse marriage and motherhood, one that hints at a form of emotional fulfilment not encompassed by the heterosexual contract:

> 'Unwomanly', 'cold-hearted', and so forth are the charges levelled. I have heard these words and their like applied to myself. I have smiled, knowing them to be from an entirely false understanding of me. (146)

In letters to Miles Franklin this writer often referred to herself as lacking the 'sex instinct'. But Mary's definition of the 'sexual' was specifically limited to what she called 'the process of reproduction' which she told Miles was 'repulsive' to her.[4] I argue

elsewhere at length that by restricting the domain of the 'sexual' to heterosexuality, Mary was able to create a positive space for her own same-sex desire within the province of friendship, albeit an increasingly contested and fragile space by the 1920s following the popularisation of sexological theory and psychoanalysis.[5] She constructed a complex hierarchy of friendships, the highest form of which was reserved for her relationship with Mabel Singleton. My interest here is in how desire is expressed in the love poems written by the woman who eschewed the label 'lesbian' and who regarded her lifelong companion as a friend. In other words, I would like to problematise the category of 'romantic friendship' which is often used to describe such relationships as this one as though the term is self-explanatory.

In her love poetry, Mary played out the ongoing complexities of her relationship with the woman she met in 1909 at the age of forty-one and with whom she shared the rest of her life. The poems cover a range of purposes, styles and moods: some commemorate significant events like the anniversary of their meeting, Mabel's birthday, and the birth of Mabel's son; others are written in response to immediate events, both momentous and trivial—from the series written about their holiday together at St Margaret's Bay near Dover in 1912 to the verse scribbled on the back of an envelope, entitled 'In Expostulation' and signed 'Myself', written when Mary called on Mabel at her flat in South Yarra to find she was out.

Some poems reflect upon comments apparently made by Mabel in letters to Mary (no letters between the two survive), one sort of text becoming the pretext for another. An instance of this practice is a sonnet called 'An Answer' which is headed with the words, ' "Sometimes I think you are like a child"—Letter from MS to MF'. Mary also borrows from other poets: one sonnet takes the first line of Wordsworth's reflection on sonnet-writing, 'Nuns fret not at their narrow cells', and uses the form (which Wordsworth described as a 'scanty plot of ground') as a vehicle for expressing her love for her 'beloved, immediate friend / The chosen of my heart'. There are poems that are angry outbursts ('Think I shall let you go / You Butterfly on the wheel'); others are playful and teasing ('All this is certain / -The sybil sign / You of the Ninth / Are one of the Nine'). Lyrical tributes to Mabel's extraordinary beauty ('Some land of Dream and Passion did devise / That form Circassian, those non-Aryan eyes') keep company with poems that berate her for it ('You smooth-cheeked statue I that love you, curse'), and with those that are self-accusing ('Across your clear face I have mixed other forms,/ And tilting at masks have wounded and thrust'). Throughout the poems, Mary reflects on the contradictions she perceives in her own nature—her reticence and her passion —and she compares and contrasts these with the strengths and weaknesses she sees in her lover.

Like her writer colleague and friend, Miles Franklin, Mary Fullerton was strongly influenced by 1890s Australian nationalism. It is my contention that Mary created her asexual but woman-oriented identity in part by taking up elements of the nationalist myth and adapting them according to the feminist and socialist political beliefs she had held from an early age. She drew from nationalist discourse its depiction of the land as female, its egalitarian position on politics, and its commitment to mateship and the bush. Filtered through the lenses of her feminism and her predilection for women, the land became both a challenging source of strength and inspiration and an Arcadian space of female sensuality. The site of egalitarianism and mateship shifted from the bushman to the figure of the pioneer woman, whose prototype was the writer's own mother, depicted in her book of autobiographical sketches, Bark House Days, about her childhood in Gippsland, Victoria, and in her Memoirs.

Mary Fullerton's identification with the Australian bush landscape was a significant element in the positive construction of her same-sex desire. For the rest of this paper I will focus on the way she deploys the image of the purple Australian native violet in her love poetry, not simply as a conventional or sentimental flower metaphor, but as a vector of desire through which the poet was able to become a desiring subject: to 'become-violet'.

The choice of the native violet as a pervasive image is richly evocative and, at the same time, highly paradoxical. This is typical of the writer who, in an acrostic sonnet based on the letters of her name, penned the lines:

> M-ary. She's complex and simple and witty and wise
> A-s foolish as God ere created
> R-ather stern of the mouth, and kind as to eyes,
> Y-ea to paradox queerly related

The violet is associated with modesty and shyness, characteristics Mary Fullerton connected with her own 'reticent' temperament; these are also quintessential signifiers of a submissive femininity. The use to which she puts the violet image contradicts while it contains these associations, for her violets stand for an active and powerful female sensuality. This is an unpretentious flower that grows wild, not a cultivated hot-house bloom, and it is clear from her writing that Mary understood her love for Mabel as 'natural', whereas she subscribed to the prevailing construction of homosexuality, particularly as it related to men such as Oscar Wilde, as decadent and unnatural. The violet also often grows in hidden places, the flower itself half-concealed beneath its leaves, evocative of lesbian invisibility, and female sex organs. Although small and fragile, it strongly resists being removed or domesticated, growing back when pulled out, or appearing in unexpected places, often outside the boundaries of the sanctioned flower bed, in cracks in the paths, for instance.

In 1912, Mary wrote a poem to Mabel called 'With Violets', which she left for her friend with a present of violets, saying 'And may suggestion of my love/ From out their fragrance come'. The poem concludes with the desire on the poet's part to fill her friend's life 'With purple violets of joy/ Of scents to soothe and thrill'. And here we have the crucial paradox contained in the image of the Australian violet, for this flower, which in these poems conveys the poet's love through its perfume, is reputed to have no scent. In two connecting sonnets titled 'A Bunch of Bush Violets' (undated but dedicated 'To You who thought of me in absence') the poet engages directly with the unperfumed reputation of the 'bush violet' and uses it to tell a story which might be read as a coded narrative of lesbian desire.

SONNET I

They say the Austral violet has no scent,
That into colour all her beauty flows;
Or to her heart the urgent sunlight goes,
And quickly steals that gift munificent,
So ere you gather her, her balm is spent:
Then in what Sabbath dell shall I suppose
You straying, found and loved and gathered those
Above whose breath I but this moment bent

I know the secret: They who gathered these,
Went hand in hand, two Lovers as I guess—
Titania in her bushland mid the trees
Led them through all its charmed lovliness
And there in her own vat of sweet perfume
For Love dipt deep each little purple bloom.

In this story Titania dips 'each little purple bloom' in her 'vat of sweet perfume' and returns them to the two lovers who gathered them. In Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the juice from the charmed flowers makes one partner in each of two sets of lovers see differently and choose the wrong partner. Chaos ensues and eventually the 'correct' order is restored. In my reading of Mary Fullerton's version, the order resolves itself, intentionally, 'incorrectly'. The flower which should have no scent acquires one when two women, the wrong partners within a heterosexual order, fall in love and discover a desire that women of Mary's time were not supposed to have, certainly not for each other. If female sexual desire is accorded an existence at all, the poem suggests, it is usually quickly extinguished by the 'urgent sunlight', a traditional image of masculinity. (In colonial poetry, there is an even more pressing image of the harmful effects of the sun in non-European latitudes causing early death and genetic decline).

SONNET II

As though 'twere not enough—the charmed vat,
The homeward way in Lovers' hands, was yet
Was yet another charm about my tiny violets set;
She gave them loving thoughts who waiting sat.
And He, the Magic Boy, his lips laid at
Their baptised beauty; thus twin beauties met,
And they withdrawn, his never shall forget,
Nor lose the sweetness by his kiss begat.

So were these mortal flowers immortal made,
So shall their balm be always close to me;
And round the Lovers too, who unafraid
Because of Love, defy the parting sea;
Nor for the child or Her shall they ere fade,
But breathe of days when partings shall not be.

In the second sonnet, the 'Magic Boy' kisses the flowers which have been 'baptised' by Titania and makes them 'immortal'. The figure of the changeling in Shakespeare's play (the 'Magic Boy' in Mary's poem) focuses, Marjorie Garber suggests, as the locus of desire for Titania and Oberon. He is 'a provoker of category crisis, a destabilizer of binarisms, sexual, erotic, hierarchical, political, conceptual' (*Vested Interests* 90). In this poem, the biblical image of baptism suggests that the fairy, Titania, a transgressive figure, sanctions this love which is not sanctioned in a culture based on a heterosexual order, while the kiss of the 'boy' further destabilises that 'normal' order. (The Magic Boy certainly also refers to Mabel Singleton's baby son, Denis, born in 1911 and brought up by the two women, whose existence became an integral part of the construction of Mary's love for her friend. Life was very difficult for the women after his

birth, hence the final lines of the second sonnet: 'Nor for the child or Her shall they ere fade, / But breathe of days when partings shall not be').

Mary Fullerton's celebration of ambivalence, contradiction and paradox contributed crucially to her ability to situate her subjectivity in the spaces between the binarisms through which knowledges (including constructions of desire) are organised hierarchically: masculinity/femininity, heterosexuality/homosexuality, lover/beloved, subject/object, and so forth. Through the use of images such as the Australian native violet, she was able to take up an active desiring position in her poetry without being forced to adopt a masculine voice; the deployment of these images also allowed for a movement across the gap between subject and object, lover and beloved. Let me turn briefly to some feminist theorists to support these statements before I return to the poetry.

In 'Refiguring Lesbian Desire', Liz Grosz draws on a minor tradition in Western thought that has been subordinated to the dominant model of desire, one that she dates back to Spinoza. Desire in this model, instead of being construed as a lack or negativity, 'is the force of positive production, the energy that creates things, makes alliances, and forges interactions between things' (75). Grosz describes it as being 'a truly nomad desire unfettered by anything external, for anything can form part of its circuit and be absorbed into its operations' (79). Like Grosz, Elspeth Probyn, in her book, *Outside Belongings*, also explores this notion of a nomad desire, of desire as energy and exchange. The title of this paper—'Becoming-Violet'—adapts one of her chapter titles—'Becoming-Horse'. Acknowledging that there is 'an archive of the connections between girls and horses', Probyn examines how those connections have been used by writers to forge other connections (56). She shows how Radclyffe Hall in *The Well of Loneliness* transubstantiates the body of Collins, the housemaid, whom Stephen Gordon desires, into that of her horse when she whispers into the horse's neck, 'You're not you any more, you're Collins' (58). Probyn also cites a story by Gloria Anzaldua of a woman who eventually realises she can love her lover, the final image being one of how 'It would start here. She would eat horses, she would let horses eat her' (59). The image, says Probyn, 'thus freed from its post within a structure of law, lack, and signification, can begin to move all over the place', becoming 'that with which we think and feel our way from body to body', that is, a vector of desire. Such images are able to 'carry longing; they throw us forward into other relations of becoming and belonging' (59-60).

The colour violet and the flower of that name, like the horse, has a history of association with lesbianism, dating back to Sappho who wrote of the violet tiaras she and her lovers wore in their hair. Marlene Dietrich divulged that violets worn on their lapels was a sign between Berlin lesbians in the 1920s (Weiss 1-2). In Mary Fullerton's love poems, the fragrance of the (officially) unscented Australian violet becomes the breath of desire. When the poet leaves violets for their scent to 'soothe and thrill' her friend in 'With Violets', it is her own desire that they transmit. Conversely, when the lover gathers violets in 'A Bunch of Bush Violets', it is the 'I' of the poem who bends over their perfumed 'breath'. In the sonnet quoted at the beginning of this paper, the speaking subject becomes the violets she desires to place on her lover's breast in a fantasy of erotic exchange: 'Better their fragrance float about your hair, / Your heartbeats pulse their sweetness to the air / That breathed again gives aromatic rest'. The movement of that poem suggests the process of love-making, culminating in the flower's 'swoon to a luxurious death' reminiscent of la petite mort, 'the little death' of sexual climax.

By shifting the focus from sexual identity categories to the movement of desire, it becomes possible to bypass such ahistorical questions as 'Was Mary Fullerton a lesbian?'. We also don't get caught up in ultimately unanswerable questions about these women's sexual practice (although I'm still often asked whether I think they 'did it' and, I suppose, I too will always wonder). Rather, the question becomes 'How was this writer able to become a desiring subject in her poems to her woman friend?' It also becomes possible to explore how a person's whole 'identity'—beliefs, locations, ways of thinking, desires—is implicated in the formation of sexual subjectivity. Rather than pinning individuals to particular sexual labels, such explorations can open up and extend ways of thinking about sexuality. And, on that note, I'd like to leave the last words to Mary Fullerton. An unpublished poem titled 'Imponderable' and written when she was seventy-three years old begins:

> Feeling can have no framed
> Solidity,
> Nor love a stable shape
> Nor can you measure me.

Notes

1 Mary Fullerton Papers, Mitchell Library, MSS2342/10. All quotations from Fullerton's poetry in this paper are taken from this source.
2 *Moods and Melodies*, Melbourne: Endacott, 1908; *The Breaking Furrow*, Melbourne: Endacott, 1921; *Moles Do So Little With Their Privacy*, (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1942); *The Wonder and the Apple*, (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1946).
3 Memoirs, Mary Fullerton Papers, MSS2342/2
4 Letter to Miles Franklin, 18 November 1929. Miles Franklin papers, Mitchell Library, MSS364/16.
5 Sylvia Martin, 'The Polygamy of Friendship: Mary Fullerton, Mabel Singleton and Miles Franklin'. Unpublished PhD thesis, Griffith University, 1997.

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